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The Polish and Korean Youth in the World of Digital Media: Communication and Interests. A Comparative Analysis¹

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Abstract

The work discusses using digital media in the processes of communicating and developing interests by the contemporary Polish and Korean youth. The youth's typical behaviour in cyberspace is described together with an interpretation of their behaviour on the basis of selected theories of influence of the mass media on viewers and listeners.

Keywords: *iGeneration, digital media, communication in cyberspace, youth, South Korea, Poland*

Introduction

Due to a permanent interest in and an intense use of digital media, and in particular of mobile media, mainly a smartphone, tablet or a notebook, the contemporary youth is becoming more and more often being called the 'iGeneration' ('iGen' for short, or Generation 'Z', who cannot function without an iPhone, iPod or an iPad, which are always on). It is a generation born after 1995. Generation Z is different from Generations X and Y (the latter were also called 'millennials',

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'network generation' or a generation 'addicted to technology', however, the phones of that time did not have as many functions as they have today and not each of their computers had access to the Web), whose life and activities were not dominated first by analogue, and then by digital media to such an extent. The characteristics of Generation 'Z' were found earlier among the Korean, Japanese or Chinese (e.g., Hong Kong) youth, than among the Polish youth, and these characteristics are the following: the head being leaned over the screen/display of a smartphone at school, on the bus, on the underground, in a tearoom or at a restaurant, not looking in their peers' or adults' eyes being in their environment, using an esoteric youth language, taciturnity, articulation problems, problems with the logical structure of a sentence, more often posting on social forums or writing short messages on Messenger, using abbreviations and acronyms derived from English (cf., Juszczuk, Kim, 2015:89–104). They have their friends rather online, who they find via the social media, rather than in the real world (we are observing in their case that differences between the online and offline worlds are fading away, between which worlds they are moving their activity easily, and they are moving their offline behaviour to the online world and vice versa); they are communicating with their friends, but not developing relations – the number of acquaintances struck up in the real world is consistently decreasing, as are face-to-face meetings and conversations. They are self-contained, having problems expressing their emotions, addicted to acquaintances on the Internet, sitting in their rooms, keeping their eyes fixed on their smartphones, isolated, they know what is going on on the Internet, and are not interested in the real world or their own environment. They are taking their phones everywhere with them, touching the screen, checking what is going on online, always analysing if they have got their notifications. They are posting photographs, videos on social networking sites: Facebook or YouTube and continuously checking if somebody has liked this information. They are not talking about their educational or life aspirations, the approval of activity on the Internet, activity which is often intriguing, unusual, and even shocking, being a sort of online exhibitionism, is becoming the most important for them. They are spending their so-called free time on the Internet, they are not getting bored there, they are up to date with what their friends are doing. They cannot function without being online, they are becoming addicted to it. The above behaviour is similar for the Polish and Korean youth, regardless of cultural differences of both societies and the specific nature of education (Juszczuk, Kim, 2016: 132–143; Juszczuk, Kim, 2017: 97–110).

Digital Media in the Life of Polish youth

In June 2017, the results of the '*Nastolatki 3.0*' ('*Teenagers 3.0*') research, conducted on the youth's representative sample, carried out by the Laboratory of Educational Applications of Information and Communications Technologies of the Institute of Research and Academic Computer Network (NASK), to the order of the Children's Ombudsman, were published in Poland. From the research, it appears that the youth's digital life is very similar to the real one. They still, if they only can, mainly play, watch movies, listen to music and keep a social life, but also learn, develop their interests and discover the world's better and worse sides. The research detailed results reveal 30% of the youth remain online all the time, regardless of their whereabouts. 93.4% uses the Internet at home every day, in the first place, to be in contact with their friends from school. A dominant proportion (85.4%) is also friends from outside school. 45.4% of the respondents declare to be constantly in touch ('several times a day') with their boyfriend/girlfriend via the Internet. Unfortunately, social life on the Internet has much the same drawbacks as that in the real world. Many from among the respondents have contact with cyberbullying on the Internet. 'Negative occurrences the youth observe the most often are the following: calling their friends names (59.7%) as well as humiliating and ridiculing them (58.1%). Spreading embarrassing materials about their friends was observed by 33.3% of the respondents, threatening friends was observed by 34.2% of the respondents, and blackmailing them via the Internet by as many as 24.4%. There have been numerous attempts to impersonate other people (40.5%). 39% of the youth do not react and do not notify either their parents or their teachers of such situations. It turned out that today's senior pupils started to use the Internet consciously at the age of 9 (the median), current secondary-school students started at the age of 10 (the median), but the age of initiation into the Internet is consistently dropping and nowadays already pre-school children have contact with the Internet. 'The Internet has become a place that helps children and teenagers fulfil their need for affiliation and social acceptance as well as create their image and a social space. Permanent access to the Internet has become a fixed attribute of personal space and social interactions, and access to a virtual network ranks a teenager in a peer hierarchy as well as may affect their self-esteem. What a few decades ago was taking place in the school and street space has currently been moved to the screen of a smartphone and of a computer' (<http://www.nask.pl/aktualności/wydarzenia> -2017).

Digital media used by Korean youth

At the beginning of the 21st century Korea became one of the most powerful players in the global digital media space. Since 2002, Korea has been ranked first in the ITU's Digital Opportunity Index (<http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/doi/index.html>), which shows that Korea is fully saturated in most information communication technology (ICT) sectors, including games, mobile media, new media production, and the Internet. In 2007, 77% of the Koreans used the Internet on a daily basis while young people under 30 made up the majority of Internet users, with a usage ratio of 99% (National Information Society Agency (NIA), 2008). Korean Internet users primarily access the Internet from home computers (96.3%) or from work (33.1%). Commercial sites such as *PC bang* (which literally means, PC room, a Korean form of Internet café) follow, as 20.9% of users frequent these sites (NIA, 2008). It can be said that youth digital media culture in Korea is deeply integrated into the existing commercial entertainment industry, which has actively incorporated digital media devices to expand its conventional venues. J. Jung, Y. Kim, W. Lim and P.H. Cheong (2005) showed that the Koreans use the computer mostly to find entertainment-related information, to play games, and to use email. Gaming is indeed the predominant online practice among Korean youth (44.6%) (Korean Game Industry Promotion Agency, 2005).

Han Woo Park and J. Patrick Biddix (2008) claim that due to rapid adoption rates, media penetration, and positive attitudes toward new and innovative technologies, Korea presents an ideal test case for understanding the everyday impact of digital media. They examined the national policies and public discourse concerning digital media education in a rapidly growing market.

The mobile phone, commonly referred to as *handphone*, with access to the Internet, can be treated as the main tool, driving force, which transforms Korea to the digital era. The youth mobile phone culture, which is centered on the use of text messaging and play culture, has become the icon of young people. Text messaging is still the most preferred mode of communication among Korean youth. Yet, the silent use of other mobile phone features – mobile phone imaging, sharing, and MMS messaging – is redefining the culture of *Eomjijok*, (the Korean version of 'Thumb Tribe'), which is another name for *N Generation* (Lee, 2003).

The youth prefers the mobile phone because it allows for informal, personal, and unregulated communication (Kwon & Choi, 2003). Korean youth becomes savvy mobile phone users at the early stages of their life. According to research by mobile phone carrier KTF (2009), Korean adolescents (aged 12–18) own first mobile phones comparatively earlier than those in Japan, China, India, and Mex-

ico, and 80.6% of Korean adolescents have their own mobile phone (compared to Japan, 77.3%; Mexico, 64%; China, 48.9%; and India, 30.6%). Mobile phones are treated as mobile screen media. Watching downloaded content (TV, dramas, animation, and movies) or browsing TV programs through a mobile TV service during their commute or down time is a typical pattern of mobile screen use (Ok, 2008).

According to H. Ok (2011), young people are the main residents of the cyberspace and are active in various online communities. In the socio-psychological approach, one can construct the image of Korean youth who easily accept cyberspace as an extension of the real world and enjoy exploring diverse new media tools for self-expression (Hwang, 2000; Soh, 2002). Sora Park, Eun-mee Kim, and Eun-Yeong Na (2015) studied the digital media literacy and networked individualism of Korean youth. Networked individualism enables Internet users to connect and socialize via their loose and transient multiple network, whereas digital literacy is a precondition of effective Internet use. Their findings indicated that online activities and skills influence the ways adolescents connect to others and perceive their social connectedness.

Blogging is another prevalent online practice of young people and J. Choi (2006, p. 173) wrote that Korea boasts the second largest number of bloggers in the world, surpassed only by the United States of America. In 1999, *Cyworld* was introduced, one of the first SNS services in the world, which represented the culturally specific tendency in the Korean blogosphere. With cute layouts, avatars, images, virtual goods, and hip multimedia content, *Cyworld* represents cute aesthetics, the unique operating principle of popular culture in Korea as well as in Japan (Hwang, Kim & Cho, 2008).

Online game and *PC bang* (Internet café) are two key words that not only represent Korean game culture, but also explain the rapid penetration of broadband. From the beginning, young people were major players on the gaming scene as well as the main residents in the thousands of *PC bangs* on every street corner. Online gaming has rapidly become a new cultural sector, with global revenues. The market value of gaming, including console/handheld, online, mobile, arcade and PC games, was as much as \$4.57 billion. The online game industry accounted for as much as 81.1% (\$3.7 billion), followed by console/handheld (11.5%), mobile, arcade and PC games (Korea Game Development and Promotion Institute, 2010). Korea has developed online games based on the increased speed of information-sharing through improved high-speed internet services, and Korean games are currently well received in the world, not in only Asia, but also in North America and Europe (Jin, 2011). The mobile phone is the common platform for

playing mobile games, which are mostly mobile versions of online games provided through mobile content services. Young female mobile gamers play with their peers in a more relaxed environment since the games do not require engagement with collective guild and clan activities found in serious PC-based online gaming (Hjorth, 2008; Jeong, 2007).

Studies of Korean youth media practices provide a fascinating lead to further our awareness of the integral role of culture in shaping technological use, by manifesting how the local appropriation of technology prefigures the potential of technology (Ok, 2008). In particular, social network service (SNS) has the characteristics of media influencing the thinking and behavior of youth, thus cyberspace improves solidarity, bond and mutual understanding and transforms the structure of consciousness, viewpoint and lifestyles of people based on the formation of shared values and tears down traditional social structure (Gong, 2016). It is worth mentioning that some research findings reveal that institutional regulations or policies have not been clearly laid out in Korea despite the developed technological and user-friendly environment.

Hermeneutical Analysis of Selected Theories of the Influence of the Mass Media on the Youth

For several dozen years, many theories describing the influence of the mass media on a viewer or listener/user were developed in the 20th century (cf. Thompson, 2001).

The genesis of believing in a direct and strong influence of the mass media on society comes from the theoretical bases, being built within a behavioural paradigm, developed in an academic environment of the early 20th century. Behaviourism is interchangeably referred to as the psychology of reaction or the objective psychology and came into existence as a result of cooperation of such fields of science as biology and physiology, initiated by the works by Edward L. Thorndike (e.g., *Animal intelligence*) as well as a result of research carried out by John B. Watson and Vladimir Bekhterev. Based on this basic research, a behavioural communication model was created, based on the stimulus-reaction model that Denis McQuail (1981, 1983) and Sven Windahl (1983: 93) defined as a specific result or effect of 'specific stimuli, triggered off in such a manner that a close link between a media message, and viewers' and listeners' reaction can be expected or even predicted'. The subsequent research contributed to expanding the process of communication of viewers and listeners with the media, by introducing such

new terms as: viewers' and listeners' predispositions, auto-selection and selective perception, and also activity and demographic diversity, diversification of the level of education, profession and place of residence. The new theoretical bases of such a diversified process of communication were described by Wilbur Schram (1978: 243), which led to developing a theory about the minimum influence of the mass media on viewers and listeners. In the 1960s, a concept of moderate influence of the mass media was formulated, situating its analyses between the two previous extreme theoretical approaches. In concepts of moderate influence, further aspects of the influence of the media such as: cognitive aspects of communication, affecting a culture, knowledge, standards and values as well as viewers' and listeners' behaviour were further analysed. On the basis of a concept with a diversified scope of viewers and listeners' possessed individual knowledge it was found that individuals with greater intellectual capabilities (cf., Blumer, McQuail, 1968; Tichenor, Donohue, Olien, 1970: 158–170), but also with a higher economic status, higher education, and personal motivation (cf., Monzón, 1992: 292–293) achieve a wider scope and a greater degree of an understanding of media messages. As a result of an increase in the scope of disseminating pieces of information, these people display a tendency to get a given piece of information quicker and more fully than people with a lower social status and lower education, who often accept information being passed on to them – a theory of adaptation talks about this (Noelle-Neumann, 1983: 66–94).

Today, differences in knowledge possessed from the mass media (the so-called *knowledge gap*) between these two social groups are indicating an upward trend and forming the structure of a theory of information gap or of information chasm (Tichenor, Donohue, Olien, 1970, pp. 158–170; Donohue, Tichenor, Olien, 1975: 3–23). This theory well describes no familiarity of pupils from families with a lower economic status, residing in small towns or in the country, with popular computer games used in their environment, no access to information being disseminated in a peer group via mobile media, not oriented in topics discussed with their use outside school and outside a class team, which contributes to the occurrence of marginalising them, and even excluding them from this community.

The 1970s and 1980s were a period of developing theories of the influence of the mass media on not only individuals, but also on social groups and entire societies. The convergence of three different, but inter-related research areas took place: of an analysis of the role and influence of the media, an analysis of journalistic functions, and an analysis of mechanisms of forming and moulding the public opinion (Esparcia, Smolak-Lozano, 2012: 181–203). Theories of the indirect influence of the mass media on viewers and listeners, rejecting the

stimulus-reaction model, i.e., negating the role of direct contact with the media, and stressing the indirect influence of different social factors were developed one after another. Within this new trend of research into communication, the following theories were formulated, which also concerned the groups of children and teenagers, and were related to the theory of small groups, theory of two-step information flow as well as theory of indirect factors (McQuil, 2008: 446–491). Selection of the contents depended on the viewer's or listener's affiliation to a small group, type of family or to a peer group, including a class team. Most often, information comes to the so-called informal opinion leaders, and only then to the other members of a user community from them. To a considerable extent, it is them who decide about a message interpretation, its evaluation and possible use. Finally, in the theory of indirect factors, the fact is stressed that the media do not act in a social vacuum, but each of the viewers and listeners functions in some small or large social group, is linked to an environment by a network of social dependencies and in connection with this the media's all and any influence should be analysed in terms of social, cultural and educational contexts. The medium that has been considered the most active in social terms is television, which has ranked high among media affecting viewers and listeners to this day.

The best known theory of the influence of the mass media was the theoretical concept of '*uses and gratifications approach*' (short: *uses and grats*) (Blumer, McQuail, 1968; Blumer, Katz, 1974; Katz, Blumer, Gurevitch, 1973–1974: 509–523) or 'use and fulfilment' (Mattelart, Mattelart, 1999: 253). Therefore, the contemporary youth make use of digital media, 'use them' for a specific purpose, they need them for various activities, to develop skills and fulfil needs, including the need for acceptance and affiliation to a group in the first place.

Also, research into the climate of the public opinion in society as well as within intergroup and intragroup relationships was carried out, to which Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974: 43–51) made the most significant contribution, and returned in her discussion to the thesis of great influence of the media (Noelle-Neumann, 1983:66–94), eliminating the minimum influence theories. Researchers stopped focusing on persuasion processes, but started focusing on selected cognitive processes, determining manners in which the media present and construct social reality. In connection with this, an aspect of individually perceiving an opinion-forming social climate by an individual was stressed, and also intentionally raising the significance of specific problems, and at the same time marginalising other subjects was emphasised. E. Noelle-Neumann (1991: 256–287) diagnosed dependencies between mass communication, interpersonal

communication, and an image an individual is developing about their own opinions in relation to views of other people who are a part of a social group or society. In the researcher's opinion, an individual often takes over opinions of the majority moulded by the media despite the fact that they may be false. In her opinion, the fear of social alienation has become the driving force of the spiral of silence. For this reason, people first observe what others do and say, and then copy this because they feel more comfortable when others agree with their opinions than when they express their original, often opposing, opinions in an environment. When an individual has opinions which are not popular in an environment, they will try to hide them, to remain silent, and at the same time they lose self-confidence (Noelle-Neumann, 1983: 66–94).

Children's and youth's communication with the media is flawlessly described by the model of structural pluralism (Tichenor, Donohue, Olien, 1970: 158–170), referring to a diversity of media, sending by them diverse media messages, appealing to viewers and listeners diversified in social and demographical terms. These factors make media messages appealing to viewers and listeners similar in social and demographical terms trigger off similar reactions, and changes of these factors result also in changes in reception perception. Primal groups, such as family and peer groups, strongly affecting similarities in the reception of messages, assimilation of standards, attitudes and opinions, have considerable significance for the reception of messages.

According to the theory of the socialisation function of the mass media, the media play a role in early socialisation and in socialisation at a later age, and the socialisation process itself takes place both outside a viewer or listener, and in them. In connection with this, a viewer or listener internalises standards, patterns of behaviour (e.g., dress, appearance, food and drink, relations with others and individual consumption models) and social values coming from media messages. Effectiveness of the socialisation function depends directly on the following: the amount of time young viewers and listeners set aside for receiving information from the media, social roles the viewers and listeners perform, motives of selection of messages, which refers to the theory of uses and gratifications, and also on confidence in individual media. However, it should be taken into consideration that the socialisation process is continuing over time, and furthermore influence of the media is subject to modifications of other social factors and different socialisation variables in family (Hedinsson, 1981). The most often, two aspects of the media participation in the socialisation process are presented. On the one hand, the media may strengthen and support other institutions participating in socialisation, however, on the other hand – the media are seen as a potential

threat to the values parents, class tutors, and other people exercising social control, instil in children. So, the media offer life models and patterns of behaviour before a young viewer or listener encounters analogous situations in their life (Rosengren, Windahl, 1989).

It is worth taking into consideration George Gebner, Lear Gross, Michael Morgan and Nancy Signorelli's 'cultivation' theory (1994), considered also as a theory of cultivating attitudes in viewers and listeners (Griffin, 2003), which, however, is narrowing down its scope since it concerns also beliefs about the universality of occurrences, and not only their evaluation and attitude towards them. A theory of the long-term influence of the media is supposed to concern mainly television, treated as an institutionalised social narrator, showing drama unfolding in real life, whereas a member of the audience is perceived as a passive viewer. Watching similar programmes, having similar storylines and behavioural acts, every day and for a long period, a young viewer becomes convinced of the existence of their equivalents in people's experiences and behaviour in the real world, and even becomes convinced of the universality of certain events (e.g., of a tragic death, often being of symbolic nature) and acts. Therefore, television is not a reflection of reality, but is becoming a reality itself.

A synthetic analysis of theories or models of the influence of the media on viewers and listeners, of which only a few selected ones are discussed above, is based either on observing the media and analysing the contents of messages, or on researching the audience (viewers and listeners) and analysing the effects of these messages. Despite these two diametrically different approaches, these theories derive from the same critical school. However, many theories are poorly supported methodologically because it is difficult to prove if the influence described in them exists or how strong and long-lasting it is. The media carry out their own tasks and have their own ideology to be a transmitter of information (e.g., about scandals, crises, social pathologies, and also about innovations), which may become an impulse for change. They stimulate taking action, arouse and cause anxiety, probably disturb the established order, which proves their potential for generating changes.

Conclusions

Contemporary young people, both in Poland and in Korea, download and upload files, surf the Internet, talk on chats, blogs, post on social forums and are do not part from their mobile phones. The age of the youth's initiation into the Internet is dropping every year and nobody will successfully decrease the youth's

willingness to function in cyberspace, therefore we should promulgate media education not only at school, but also in family.

The youth need adults' wise backing so that the time spent on the Internet is used as safely and as usefully as possible. It is the parents' and teachers' responsibility to acquaint the youth with new social spaces, consisting in controlling, explaining and structuring new contents and meanings so that they are safe and valuable in cognitive and educational terms.

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